

Power Outage and Freezer Safety
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It is the end of winter time but heavy storms may still occur, and one thing that goes hand in hand with the bad weather is power failure. Whether it's a traffic collision involving a power pole or a tree knocking down a power line due to snow, when the lights go out, so do the freezer and refrigerator. There are several things that can be done in the event of a power failure to reduce food loss. Use backup power, keep the doors closed, try dry ice, and cover the freezer to keep it cool.

Having a backup generator is very handy in a power failure. This keeps the electricity running to the freezer and refrigerator uninterrupted. Refer to a licensed electrical contractor for proper installation. For some people, this is not an option.

If the power fails, certain precautions can be taken to assure the safety of frozen food. If the freezer can be turned back on within two days, keep the door closed to avoid loss of refrigeration. The freezer can be covered with a heavy blanket. Safety pins can be used to hold the blanket away from the vents in case the electricity is restored.

If power will not be restored within 48 hours, 2½ pounds of dry ice per cubic foot of capacity can be used. Use gloves to place the dry ice on boards or heavy cardboard on top of the food. This can keep the temperature inside the freezer below freezing for two to three days in a half full freezer, three to four days in a loaded freezer.

If all else fails and there is a heat source and canning equipment, preserving the food according to proper canning methods may be the best option.

Keeping a freezer thermometer in the freezer is the best way to tell if the freezer is cold enough. Another method is to use an empty plastic soda bottle. Fill the bottle half full of water and put it in the freezer, on its side. Once the bottle has frozen solid, turn the bottle upright and place it in the door. The door is the warmest part of the freezer. If the power goes out while the family is on vacation, or during a storm, the water will melt and gravity will cause the water to settle in the bottom of the bottle. Once the electricity is restored, the water will refreeze in an upright position. This creates a visual cue that the power was interrupted for an extended time.

Food safety should be the number one concern. Discard food that has been above 40° F for more than 2 hours, or is contaminated by raw meat juices. Thawed and refrozen ice cream or other dairy products should be discarded.

Some partially thawed food can be refrozen if it has not been warmed above 40° F. If the thawed food still has ice crystals, is cold enough to refreeze.

Power outages in the foothills are a way of life. Taking several steps in advance to reduce potential food loss due to an outage keeps food safe:

1. Keep an old blanket and some safety pins stored on top of the freezer or nearby. An old blanket from a thrift store can be pre-cut to the size of the freezer for easy use.
2. Heavy cardboard or 1/8" plywood can be pre-cut to fit the freezer. This can be done now, while the power is on rather than wasting precious refrigeration during an outage to get the fit right. This can be stored next to the freezer.

Questions about safe home food preservation? Call the Master Food Preservers and leave a message at (530) 621-5506. A Master Food Preserver will return the call. The Master Food Preservers are also available free of charge to speak to organizations and clubs about food safety or food preservation topics. Just call the number above to arrange for a speaker for small or large groups. For more information about the public education classes and activities, including the free public classes on food safety and pressure canning, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/.